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Tröhler, Margrit

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IMAGINE, THERE IS A WAR AND NOBODY TAKES ANY NOTICE – Ostentatious gestures and the circulation of images in the collective imagination Margrit Tröhler

Like many of his earlier photographic and audiovisual works, Thomas Galler's video installations titled WEEK END (2008) and INCHES (2005) are based on found footage, on "found" image sequences taken from the universally accessible stock of images circulating in our media society. Galler takes these pictures out of their original contexts, combines them anew, and redispays them in a different environment. Be it trash, junk, antique, or an archaeological find, everything can be accommodated in this "musée imaginaire" (Malraux) and then recycled. The found-footage artist fishes his set pieces out of the sea of images stored in the ever-changing and rapidly growing audiovisual archive that defines the collective (inter-subjective) memory images of an era. Stored here are also a diversity of images and sounds from the past, like layers of sediment in which documentary and fictional materials collide, while images of historical events mingle with staged image and sound events.

To work with found footage means to work with images about images and sounds (language, voice, sound, music). For Galler this means essentially recontextualising individual elements and fragments through a collage. Not only does this process analyse and deconstruct the content and its form of expression, but it also questions the evidence status of cinematically analogous images. By combining image with sound and images with image sequences, the artist's view and standpoint are inscribed in the collages of audiovisual fragments and in the spaces in between: in the fields of tension, the dynamics, the rhythm. The individual elements, on the other hand, are left untouched by Galler (in other words, he does not scratch, colour, burn, or distort them like other found-footage artists). And so, as is the case with ready-mades, everyday images lose their actual function, their direct functional value as objects for information or entertainment, while retaining traces of their referentiality.

In the context of the museum as a venue for exhibitions, they are foreign bodies, yet ones that relate to the world; given their direct or indirect references to historical events and to other images, the dust of (film) history still clings to them. Simultaneously, the new museum environment functions like a cheese cover under which these image-objects begin to sweat; presented on a pedestal (INCHES) or on a stage (WEEK END), taken out of the circulation of images in society and alienated from their primary socio-cultural function, they exude their materiality and mediality. They draw our attention to their forms of expression, to the way in which they have been made, to the quality of the material, and to the spaces in between that are opened up by the collage. The gestures involved in the process of creation and in the form of address are, therefore, doubly recognisable on the perceptible surface of the final product, yet more as questions than as answers. The authorship oscillates between the often anonymous origin of the images and their recontextualisation by Galler, whose interventions remain subtle, without forcing the interpretation of the image sequences in any obvious direction. In this manner, the set pieces appeal directly to our audiovisual memory, demand to be recognised by us as viewers or to be associated with other familiar images and sounds. Through the form of the collage, the works call on us to seek meanings as in a rebus and in turn to form new combinations ourselves.

In other words, what combines WEEK END and INCHES in terms of content, also with reference to the selection and compilation of the material, is the subject of war, or, more precisely, the metaphorical relationship between war and play. These two poles, which are infused with values and emotions, are linked to and confronted with each other via the camouflaged and yet manifest subject of manliness. Even if they explain nothing but only show display and question the development and impact of the US wars in Afghanistan and Iraq (WEEK END) or in Guadalcanal (against Japan) in the western Pacific (INCHES), both Galler's works can be read as "anti-war films", as a demonstration of the senselessness of war. Vietnam, too, is indirectly present in WEEK END, be it in the title as a reference to the film of the same name by Jean-Luc Godard (1967) or in the reproduction of a drill scene reminiscent of the one in Stanley Kubrick's FULL METAL JACKET (1987).

The complex relationship between war, play, and manliness is, however, more than an issue raised and questioned by the two video installations. Each installation for itself, and in its reference to the other in the exhibition space, focuses on the level of iconography and rhetoric, on formulas of cultural and audiovisual (self-)depiction, and on aspects of their appeal. It thus lays tracks

for facilitating the analysis of the signifier, the perceptible, the media-related surface, so to speak – tracks for the analysis of *what* can be seen and heard in the films and on their sets and *how* this has come to be depicted, as the act and process of creating, designing, conveying, and addressing through body, voice, music, image, and sound. The sequences that Galler detaches from the audiovisual archive and recombines are, therefore, much more than simply “documents” referring to an earlier event (as an index or as something that “has been”, *ça a été* in the sense of Roland Barthes); one can agree with Michel Foucault (from whom I have also borrowed the archive concept) and speak of “monuments” that testify to patterns of behaviour, viewing habits, and their conditionalities, of what can be perceived today and of what can actually be depicted. And so the monuments also bear witness to things that escape one’s attention and perception (from a particular perspective), to those that are deliberately left out, or those that defy depiction – for example, the perspective of the “other” side in an inter-cultural conflict, the daily experiences of ordinary people in a war zone, or during moments when there is no shooting.

WEEK END is about the latter. The video shows the breaks in the fighting as experienced by (very) young American soldiers; for them these moments mean recreation, free time spent on dares, brawls, vandalism, karaoke performances, or hip-hop interludes and practising the necessary dance steps. It is striking that all these games that are played to while away the time are performed as self-productions, alone or for a group of other soldiers (including a handful of female ones), and are always captured on camera; the postures and gestures put manliness on display, in which potency as a show of power, the propensity to violence, and pent-up sexuality find expression in an uncontrolled and uncontrollable mix. Here we see patterns of social and military group dynamics that shape the bodies and the behaviour of individuals while transcending the individual who realises these patterns of behaviour. Between imitation and self-invention there is also the rap music scene (besides the drill scene already discussed) in which two black soldiers re-enact the ritual before a boxing match, just like the one with the young white soldier at the beginning who performs a rap song (by Eminem) about war, danger, valour, and death, for which he poses directly in front of his (mobile phone) camera. Like all soldiers’ songs (an example being the ‘Beresinalied’), this gesture – one that here also adopts the rap pose of the political and cultural minority – oscillates between the lament about suffering, the incantation of solidarity or collective identity, and the over-glorification of the chosen one himself as the saviour of the nation.

Karaoke, too, is part of the culture of recycling that delivers the prototypes (in the mind and from the archive) for the activities indulged in by these young people: climbing into the skin of the other, in which one can “per procura” live out one’s wishes, ideas, and fears, between a subservient gesture vis-à-vis the prototype and an act of self-assertion in the acquisition of the other person’s mask. It is not about parody or satire – karaoke fans are anything but critics of existing norms and are certainly no revolutionaries – but every bit of speech, each gesture, each act becomes a quotation, a drama, and a display for others (who, as spectators, are often present in the pictures themselves) to view and for the camera to capture. This camera seems to serve as a prosthesis and helps the subjects express themselves, even if this is always according to a preconceived formula (one could thus say that the camera functions as “self-technology” – this, too, along the lines of Foucault).

With the posting of these pictures on YouTube (which was, in all probability, illegal following the events in Abu Ghraib), the poses that make up the repeatedly adjusted self-portrayal are nonetheless a statement; to speak of an actual message would be an exaggeration. As an act of externalisation and visualisation, the ostentatious gesture of their performance on the Internet draws attention to the hopeless, desolate situation of the young men who seem to be sublimating their loneliness and isolation in this manner. For, just “imagine, there is a war and nobody takes any notice”, or better: “... and nobody is taking any notice of us”, in a clean war – “where the camera says ‘hit’”, as in the first rap song. By “restaging” and by “resignifying” found formulas, be they for patterns of behaviour, images, or texts, the self-portrayal of soldiers becomes a performative act, as described by Judith Butler. In the ostentation, in the explicit and expressive acts of exhibiting and displaying, the figurative speech of infinite quoting results in the statement: “I am somebody” – a statement that enables one to emerge from anonymity and to invent an existence.

In a kind of “mise en abîme”, the endless repetition of the same figure, Thomas Galler’s found footage reinforces the ostentatious gesture of displaying through the process of selecting and reusing images that have been found and circulated worldwide. This gesture is underlined further when the monitor on which the audiovisual collage can be seen is on a stage in the context of the museum. In any case, his ostentatious gesture draws our attention to the creation of the images and the sounds and to their recontextualisation and suggests the deconstruction of the soldiers’ macho manner to be an artistic and political act. The images do not, however, lose their original ambiguity, or even ambivalence. As members of the audience we are set a memory task,

in which we are called upon to take the audiovisual fragments of memory as expressions of and statements about the actual world and put them together as in a puzzle, to interpret the puzzle, and to produce an emotional response. The last mentioned is particularly difficult because, at least by the closing stages of WEEK END, we are reminded of the images of Abu Ghraib: how in the well-known torture scenes, some soldiers are scuffling and crawling on the floor in a narrow corridor, more or less backlit, before – almost as a continuation of what went before, though probably taken from different footage but with the same Arabic music – a soldier on the ground starts spinning around like a stunned insect. Is he practising a hip-hop dance movement, or imitating a mentally challenged person, or is he himself suffering from psychological problems? The expression of helplessness is unsettling, the opinions on the role of perpetrator or victim start to waver, and our emotional response is on uncertain ground...

We are similarly disturbed by INCHES. The visibly weary soldiers – whose pictures Gallier detaches from the anti-war film THE THIN RED LINE (1998) by Terrence Malick and then reassembles – appear increasingly haggard and disillusioned during the course of the film that lasts approximately four minutes. In contrast to this, there is the soundtrack accompanying the chain of images: as a voice-over we hear the stirring “inspirational speech” by Al Pacino from Oliver Stone’s ANY GIVEN SUNDAY (1997): In his role as a coach, he is trying to motivate his football team before a crucial match by evoking the team spirit that should help weld the players together and fire individual ambition. Carried along by the rhythm of emotional music, his raw voice gains increasingly in forcefulness and fervour: “Inch by inch, play by play, till we’re finished. We’re in hell right now, gentlemen. Believe me. And we can stay here, get the shit kicked out of us, or we can fight our way back into the light. We can climb out of hell.” It is not just the contrast between the image and the soundtrack but also the countermovement in the development of the image and the soundtrack that allows the metaphor of the game as a battle and a war to appear as sport (even if constructed as a riddle at first glance, as we get to know the titles of the two recycled films only at the end). Yet this is a question of life and death: “Life’s this game of inches. So is football. Because in either game, life or football, the margin for error is so small. I mean, one half a step too late or too early and you don’t quite make it...” The absurdity of the metaphor in turn pillories manliness. Nevertheless, we can hardly avoid the high emotional drama of the scene. It is, however, also disrupted by the black screens that are rhythmically interspliced between the image sequences, as in WEEK END, reducing us to our own views and blueprints of perception. Devoid of the

context of the images from Stone's film, Al Pacino's speech seems like an incitement to war, using American football to put the collective identity of the team or the troops above everything else: "Either we heal now as a team or we will die as individuals." Yet nothing can now arouse the enthusiasm of the broken soldiers whose individual portraits we see while listening to these words... Irony and sarcasm begin to surface, opening up a field of tension between image and sound that raises questions about American culture, about a culture that knows how to measure everything ("inch by inch") and one that appeals to us to boot. This is because the film culture that is currently debating found-footage work has long been part of the global audiovisual archive of the twentieth century that dominates our minds today with regard to the images of war.

This audiovisual archive is not a storage place, not a warehouse, but contains the images that are circulating in the collective imagination of our Western societies. Included in this kind of memory are the propagandist music videos of the National Guard, which used the songs "Warrior" by Kid Rock or "American Soldier" by Toby Keith in American cinemas to recruit young soldiers for the (peace) mission in one of the American war zones (it can still be seen on YouTube). Their metaphorical, rhetorical, and emotional make-up is not very far removed from that of Al Pacino's speech. Yet regardless of whether this link between the two installations is available to us as members of the audience, our associations are unencumbered, bouncing back and forth between the two works like a ping-pong ball. Thomas Galler's ostentatious gesture, the act of exhibiting these images and sounds that are universally accessible today in the museum context, heightens the tension in the relationship between the two works – a tension that is inherent and is brought to the surface by the recontextualisation. It also adds to the confusion, the incomprehension, the feeling of being overwhelmed, and to the questions that crop up vis-à-vis our own images and emotions. Without being in the least didactic, Galler's art guides us to a kind of media-based historiography that we must all conceive ourselves: a confrontation with history that does not build on the immediate memory of events but works with images in our memory and with rhetorical and iconographic patterns that have been discovered, because a direct visualisation is not possible, of the past or of the present.